

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY  
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR:  
EXCEEDING MEANS**

**20 October 2000**

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Courses 5601 and 5602

Fundamentals of Statecraft and Fundamentals of Military Thought and Strategy

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Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>20 OCT 2000</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>20-10-2000 to 20-10-2000</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>The Iran-Iraq War: Exceeding Means</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES <b>The original document contains color images.</b>					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>23</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

In September 1980, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, which initiated one of the longest and bloodiest wars in contemporary Middle Eastern history. Saddam most likely chose to use military force because of threats to his regime from Iranian-sponsored subversion which he failed to counter with diplomacy, combined with the opportunity presented by Iran's increased vulnerability after the fall of the Shah. However, Saddam's military objective was too limited to force a negotiated settlement and he inflamed Iranian nationalism, thus sparking the eight year war that greatly exceeded Iraq's means. Key lessons of this war include the importance of selecting military centers of gravity, the critical impact of assumptions that prove false, and nationalism's unpredictability and impact on war.

This paper will focus on Saddam's decision to go to war and his initial strategy. The Iran-Iraq war is worth studying to understand the relationship between ends, ways and means and why Saddam exceeded his means. We will examine, from a strategic and military perspective, Saddam Hussein's decision to go to war, what he hoped to gain, why his strategy failed to balance ends and means and the lessons learned that could facilitate successful strategy in the future.

In context of the era, Saddam's rule was vulnerable to domestic turmoil supported by the revolutionary regime in Iran. In 1979, after the Islamic Revolution swept Iran, resulting in the overthrow of the Shah, Iran began publicly urging the Iraqi population to rise up and overthrow the Iraqi government because of fundamental differences in the respective regimes. First, Iraq was led by the Sunni Islamic sect, which had a history of tension and conflict with the Shia, the principal Iranian Islamic sect. Secondly, after the

revolution the new regime declared Iran to be the “Islamic Republic” and in its constitution described the government as “a system based on the belief in...religious leadership and continuous guidance.”<sup>1</sup> The Iraqi Bathist regime was a secular government, and Saddam urged Arab nationalism over religious fundamentalism—he wanted to foster a homogenous society of Shia, Sunni and Kurds.<sup>2</sup> Third, Iran viewed Iraq as pro-western and Iran was anti-western because of the west’s support for the Shah and also because Iran perceived the west as a threat to Islam.

Iranian support centered on the Iraqi Shiites and this was especially threatening to Iraq because 60 percent of Iraq’s population is Shiite, predominately in the south, with limited representation within the government.<sup>3</sup> The prevalent perspective of Iran’s new religious leadership towards Saddam was expressed by a senior Mullah, “We have taken the path of true Islam and our aim in defeating Saddam Hussein lies in the fact that we consider him the main obstacle to the advance of Islam in the region.”<sup>4</sup> That these open attacks were common could certainly not be taken lightly by Iraq, given the renewed Iranian support for Iraqi anti-government groups.

The Shia challenge was much more serious to Saddam than that posed by the Kurdish revolts in Northern Iraq in 1975, also supported by Iran. These revolts had a devastating effect on Iraq despite that the Kurds only represented about twenty percent of the Iraqi population whereas, the Iraqi Shia population that Iran was attempting to manipulate in 1980 represented a majority of Saddam’s population.<sup>5</sup> In 1975, Iraq agreed to give up part of the Shatt al’Arab, the waterway that splits Iran and Iraq and provides Persian Gulf access, if Iran agreed to stop political support of the Kurdish rebellion. This was known as the Algiers Agreement and Saddam was still bitter about that agreement in

1980 because Iraq had been forced to make territorial concessions in 1975 to what was then a much stronger Iran. A key aspect of the compromise was the commitment to respect each other's sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the Ayatollah's support for Shia unrest and call for Saddam's overthrow was both a direct violation of that agreement and an acute threat to Iraq.

The road that led to Saddam's initiation of war was full of early diplomatic and domestic attempts to subdue the Iraqi unrest and ensure peace with Iran. In doing this, Saddam provided a coherent response to neutralize that fundamentalist threat growing in Iran in the late 70's. Internally, Saddam worked a campaign of unity demonstrations with all Muslims, and externally he portrayed himself as leader of openness and fairness. None of these actions, as we will show, led to peace.

Saddam attempted numerous demonstrations of Islamic piety to reduce his vulnerability to Shia unrest, and he may also have intended these actions to signal a warming to the Iranian regime. In 1979, Saddam allocated 80 million dollars for Shia and Sunni shrines, mosques and the welfare of pilgrims.<sup>7</sup> He publicly backed clerics who supported his regime and he also conveyed support for all religions and sects. In late 1979, Saddam resorted to projecting himself as a pious Muslim by praying at numerous holy shrines, both Sunni and Shia. As a further measure of conciliation towards the Shia, he declared Imam Ali's birthday as a national holiday—Ali was a pivotal Shia holy leader.<sup>8</sup> Saddam's efforts at piety had mixed results internally, but were not taken seriously by Iranian leadership who knew Saddam was fundamentally secular in his approach to governance.

On the other hand, Saddam's attempt to reduce hostilities with Iran failed. In July 1979, Saddam reiterated interest in establishing close relations with Iran "based on mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs."<sup>9</sup> This was rebuffed by the Ayatollah. Again taking the initiative, Saddam asked to visit Tehran in August of 1979, but the request was denied by the Iranian leadership.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it appears the Iraqi diplomacy door to Iran was closed early in Ayatollah's rule.

During this period, Iran also initiated guerrilla training for Iraqi Shias and sent them back to Iraq once trained.<sup>11</sup> With unrest on the rise, Saddam increased negative incentives to regain control of Southern Iraq by instituting martial law and death sentences. In addition to the unrest with the Shia and verbal threats from Iran, there were twenty known assassination attempts of Iraqi leadership by Shia in late 1979 and 1980. In March 1980, the al' Dawa had resorted to attacking Baath police stations, offices and recruiting centers. In retaliation, 97 civilian and military men were executed. In response, Khomeini, at this point, stated "The war the Iraqi Baath wants to ignite is a war against Islam... the people and the Army of Iraq must turn their backs on the Baath regime and overthrow it."<sup>12</sup>

The assassinations reached their peak in April 1980 with the failed assassination attempt on Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi Deputy Premier. In reaction to the increasing hostility to his regime, Saddam ordered the execution of Ayatollah Baquir al-Sadr, the prominent leader of the revolutionary Iraqi Shia party.<sup>13</sup> Finally, in June of 1980, the Iranian President and Chief of Armed Forces Bani-Sadr reportedly threatened to invade Iraq.<sup>14</sup> This signaled a new level of threat and all of these indicators of unrest and Iranian sponsored revolutionary actions pushed Saddam to take initiative to preserve his power.

Saddam's decision to use force to neutralize the Iranian threat to his regime was probably influenced by a combination of strategic factors. There was strong support for Iraq within the Gulf region, whereas Iran was diplomatically isolated. Iran was also in a state of domestic and military turmoil.

In the months preceding the war, Iran was isolated within the region and internationally, while Iraq enjoyed the full support of its Gulf neighbors, a significant potential advantage to Iraq. Iran had been holding 52 US hostages since 1979 and was therefore isolated from the west. Additionally, she was isolated from the Soviets because of their war in Afghanistan, which Iran viewed as a threat to its regional security. Iran also viewed the spread of communism, atheist in nature, as a threat to Islam. During this period, Iran had demanded complete Soviet withdraw from Afghanistan and supported the Afghan resistance.<sup>15</sup>

Regionally, the Shia-based Islamic revolution, which Iran threatened to export, was a direct threat to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and the UAE, all of which have large Shia populations. Like Iraq, they too were vulnerable because they were ruled by Sunnis and had secular governments, in this case monarchies.<sup>16</sup> According to Dilip Hiro, a respected Middle East historian, by August of 1980, Saddam had visited the rulers of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and discussed military plans with them, garnering their support.<sup>17</sup> So Iraq could expect at least regional support while anticipating that there was little chance of support for Iran by the West or Russia.

Iranian internal strife during this timeframe was significant. After the fall of the Shah, the Ayatollah's rule had not been consolidated and Iran appeared to be in "...near anarchy with radical Muslims, Marxists and clerics all struggling for control."<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, the Kurds were causing turmoil both in Iran and Iraq and the Kurd success in October of 1979 forced the Iranians to accept a compromise cease-fire.<sup>19</sup> In June and July of 1980, there were two coup attempts by both the Army and the Air Force which were preempted.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Saddam had the active cooperation of recently deposed Iranian political and military leaders who commanded the loyalties of hundreds of Iranians in key positions within the Islamic republic, and reportedly encouraged Saddam to take action because of perceived weakness in the new regime.<sup>21</sup> Based on the turmoil, coup attempts and “inside information,” one can assume that Saddam believed Iran was politically vulnerable.

Militarily, although both countries’ fielded forces were roughly equal in size, there was reason to question Iran’s military leadership capability and readiness. Iran’s Army had split into Pasadran and regular forces with the Pasadran falling under the Ayatollah, so lack of unity of command was a potential weakness.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, many top Iranian leaders had fled, bringing into question the quality of the new leadership. Logistically, Iran’s military equipment was comprised mostly of western arms, and because of the hostage crisis, supplies had been cut off, causing a decline in readiness.<sup>23</sup> Alternatively, Saddam probably calculated that arms would continue to flow to him from the Soviet Union so long as tensions persisted between Iran and the USSR.

Because of the opaqueness of the Hussein regime, we can only surmise his interests and political objectives. Most of the literature on this subject focuses on four areas: survival of the Hussein regime, expansion of the Iraqi economic power, reacquiring the Shatt-al-Arab, and Saddam’s desire to become the leader of the Arab peoples. When assessing the Iraqi regime, it is logical to assume that Saddam’s and Iraq’s

interests are interchangeable because of the autocratic nature of the regime. Clearly it was in his interest to maintain power, preserve the integrity of his borders, and ensure a strong economy. Of these interests, it is the first two that were most at risk in 1980. Saddam's economy was booming with oil revenues, having skyrocketed from \$1B in 1972 to \$30B in 1980, so there was no pressing economic incentive.<sup>24</sup> Acquiring the East half of the Shatt-al-Arab would only have offered a significant economic advantage if access to the Gulf from the waterway had been denied, which had not happened prior to the invasion. However, Saddam was likely disgruntled over the loss of assets on the East coast of the waterway and was clearly upset over Iranian lack of compliance with the Algiers Agreement.

Although there has been some speculation that Saddam envisioned becoming the dominant Arab leader, it is not clear that this was a driving force, and his previous efforts to appease the Ayatollah seem inconsistent with that vision as well. However, in light of the direct threat to his regime by Iran, one can assume that Saddam's most compelling interest was to maintain sovereign power. Attempted and actual assassinations against his top leadership, internal uprisings by the Shia that comprised the majority of his population (and over 80 percent of his military), and the threat of invasion by Iran, have one common denominator—the Islamic revolution. So it is logical to assume that Saddam's principal political objective was to contain that revolution to help ensure his personal survival, neutralize Iran's motivation to invade and reduce the threat of rebellion within Iraq's borders. Despite other possible benefits that Saddam may have recognized, one can conclude the Iranian threat to his principal objective, personal survival as leader

of Iran, as well as his inability to neutralize that threat by other means, forced his decision to initiate war with Iran.

Saddam's initial military operations are summarized below to frame our analysis of his strategy. The initial attack was preceded by 14 months of military hostilities along the Iran-Iraq border. These attacks escalated in the weeks preceding Saddam's invasion when Iraqis "liberated" the border towns of Zain Al Qaws on 7 September, and Saif Asad on 10 September. Additionally, the Iraqis took control of five border posts between 10 and 13 September.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the Iranians did not mount a military response to these actions. Iraq's actual invasion of Iran commenced on 22 September.

The main attack was in the Basra area, led by three Iraqi armor divisions and two mechanized divisions, penetrating approximately 100 kilometers before voluntarily halting their advance. Simultaneously, Iraqi forces also laid siege to the ethnically Arab towns of Abadan and Korramshahr. In the North, two additional infantry divisions advanced into Iran to take up blocking positions along traditional Iranian invasion routes. In total, seven of twelve Iraqi divisions were used in the invasion. Iraq's primary strategic centers were within 100 miles of the border and included Baghdad in the central region, the Kirkuk oil fields to the North and to the South, Basra, a port city positioned on the West bank of the Shatt Al-Arab.<sup>26</sup> The remaining five divisions were postured in Eastern Iraq, most likely to protect these vital interests. Air Force and Naval attacks were not decisive.

Diplomatic results following the attack were mixed. Iraq successfully lobbied the UN to delay a meeting of the Security Council until October when the Iraqi offensive

terminated. Then, much to Iraq's advantage, Security Council Resolution 479 required only a cease-fire—no requirement to return the land. Saddam offered a cease-fire as an incentive for Iran to begin the negotiation process, however, Iran refused.<sup>27</sup> This served to reinforce Iran's isolation, while Iraq continued to benefit from support of its Gulf neighbors and the west, despite its aggression. Several Gulf States provided financial aid for Iraq and allowed them to disperse their aircraft in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Russia initially cut off supplies to Iraq and then ultimately provided arms. But they also provided arms to Iran as she softened her stance against the Soviets out of necessity.

Having established Saddam's political objective of maintaining power and having reviewed his military actions, we can deduce Saddam's military strategy and objective. His military objective appeared to be to capture the Shatt-al-Arab, which does not tie directly to his objective of ensuring survival. However, his negotiation tactic appeared to include giving up part of the territorial gains to both sue for peace and reach agreement that Iran would stay out of Iraq's domestic affairs—Saddam's most likely desired end state to ensure his survival, the political goal.<sup>28</sup> Based on his voluntary halt and almost immediate offer for negotiation, one can conclude that he did not intend to initiate an all out general war. He only used 7 of 12 divisions, penetrated a scant 100 kilometers, did not threaten Tehran, and only massed his airpower on the first day.

It is logical to assume that Saddam did not want a long war for several reasons. First, one month after he initiated the attack he stated "Despite our victory, if you ask me now if we should have gone to war, I would say it would be better if we had not gone to war. But we had no other choice."<sup>29</sup> If he considered the invasion successful, and still held his gains, why would he regret initiating the attack? One possible reason is that he

had not obtained a settlement and had no clear exit strategy, contrary to his short war plan.

The other evidence that Saddam desired a short war is that he attacked only five weeks before the plains of Khuzestan become soggy with the onset of winter rains in November, which would greatly inhibit mechanized maneuver until the following June. This would have limited his options for a more aggressive sequel to the initial attack to compel negotiations, and it would also have limited Iran's counterattack options. Finally, and most importantly, given Iran's 3 to 1 advantage in manpower reserves, a protracted war could never be advantageous to Iraq.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, we can deduce that Saddam's strategy can be described as "invade and negotiate."

In retrospect, we can deduce that Saddam's "invade and negotiate" strategy may have been based on critical assumptions which proved to be false. As previously established, Saddam's most compelling political objective would have been to ensure his survival by containing the Islamic Revolution. A strategy of limited invasion followed by negotiation could reasonably fulfill that objective if adequate force had been employed to compel Iran to cease subversive support within Iraq and deter an Iranian invasion of Iraq. One assumption for this strategy to work would be that Iran did not want to engage or could not afford to engage in war. It was logical to assume that Iran might have been adverse to war based on its failure to respond to the capture of two border villages and five border posts between 7 and 13 September. However, Iraq's subsequent invasion of Iran was met with fierce fighting, full mobilization and inflamed nationalist feelings.

The key assumption that may have been part of Saddam's logic would have been that a limited invasion would compel Iran to negotiate. This can only be deduced as an

assumption based on the limited nature of the attack and Saddam's immediate offer of negotiation while still in a clearly advantageous position. However, this limited invasion failed to pressure Iran to negotiate. Furthermore, with a significant advantage in manpower and an ideological dislike of the secular Iraqi regime, the Iranians had little motivation to concede defeat. Thus, Saddam's strategy seemed to rest on flawed assumptions.

This limited attack also reinforces the theory that it was not Saddam's principal military objective to overthrow Khomeini. Had he been committed to an overthrow, Saddam would surely have sought a decisive land battle or threatened Tehran directly and pursued either or both of those courses of action until the overthrow was initiated or he was no longer capable of military aggression. However, even if it was not his principal military objective, Saddam had good reason to assume that the Ayatollah's power in his new regime was so fragile that the invasion would trigger his overthrow. This assumption would be logical based on the rift in the Iranian military, with the Pasadran loyal to the Ayatollah and regular forces considered untrustworthy. There was reported tension between Khomeini and his President and senior military officer, Bani-Sadr, the leader of regular forces. Additionally, the two coup attempts in June and July of 1980 by the regular army forces and the Air Force were further evidence of a significant rift between the military and Ayatollah's regime. So although Saddam may not have been willing to risk a more aggressive invasion to ensure Khomeini's capitulation, one could presume he expected that Khomeini's fall would be a possible byproduct of the limited invasion. However, Khomeini's regime proved not to be that fragile.



There are at least two approaches to measure the effectiveness of Saddam's military strategy. One is to view the strategy simply in terms of whether or not it achieved the principal political objective—in this case, did Saddam survive and maintain his power? A second approach is broader—did he balance ways and means to achieve his desired end state? We will analyze his strategy below, using both perspectives.

If we assess Saddam's strategy by measuring whether or not he accomplished his political objective of staying in power and surviving, his strategy was indeed successful. Internal dissension from the Shia rebels subsided for the most part during the ensuing eight year war with Iran.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, it did not subside because of reduced Iranian support for subversion, but because the forces of nationalism proved stronger than their Sunni ties. The Iraqi Shias were Arabian, not Persian and spoke Arabic not Farsi—they envisioned themselves as part of the larger Arab world, not an expanded Iranian state.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the external threat of an Iranian invasion and overthrow of Saddam never materialized, even though in 1982 the Iranians mounted a strategic offensive into Iraq. However, after a long strategic stalemate, Iraq ultimately forced them back into Iran in 1988 with the use of maneuver supported by nerve gas attacks.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, Iran agreed to a cease-fire, Iraq gained part of the Shatt Al-Arab, and Saddam survived—a narrow success.

If, however, we take a broader view that strategy is a way to correlate means and ways to achieve ends, Saddam clearly exceeded his intended means both in time and resources. We have already established his intention to execute a short war of several weeks, and that Iran's massive population advantage of 38 million to Iraq's 13 million was a clear disadvantage for Iraq if a long war resulted.<sup>34</sup> The war ultimately cost Iraq

hundreds of thousands of lives and it is estimated over \$100B in debt.<sup>35</sup> This enormous debt challenge was likely an incentive for Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 to expand his oil revenues. Subsequently, the Gulf War and ten years of subsequent UN sanctions have devastated his economy, limited his sovereignty (no-fly and no-drive zones) and resulted in almost total diplomatic isolation. Although still in power, the strategic choice to invade Kuwait, motivated, in part, by the debt generated from the long eight year war with Iran, left Saddam much less powerful domestically, militarily, economically and diplomatically in 2000 than he was in 1980. Therefore, by this broader measure, one can conclude that Saddam's military strategy did not successfully integrate ways and means.


Several major lessons can be learned from Saddam's strategy in initiating the Iran-Iraq war. First, military operations should be aimed at the enemy's center of gravity. Second, before embarking on a campaign, strategists should carefully consider the potential outcome if key assumptions prove false. Finally, when planning a short war strategy, one should consider the possibility of sparking the forces of nationalism, thus triggering a long war.

The first lesson is that the enemy's center of gravity should be the object of military operations to ensure the political ends are achieved. Current US Joint Doctrine defines centers of gravity as "...those characteristics, capabilities, or localities from which military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight." In the context of Saddam's objective to compel a negotiated settlement, he needed to reduce either the Iranian capability or will to fight, but his initial strategy did neither. The renowned military theorist, Carl Von Clausewitz, refers to three examples of centers of

gravity; the capital, the army and principal allies. Ultimately, Saddam transitioned to general war and broke the Iranian will to fight by a combination of decisive field victories supported by chemical warfare, and an aggressive missile offensive against the capital which demoralized the Iranian population, consistent with Von Clausewitz's theory. Von Clausewitz also stated:

Blow by blow must be aimed at same direction...Not by taking things the easy way--using superior strength to filch some province, preferring the security of this minor conquest to great success-but by constantly seeking out the center of his power...<sup>36</sup>

It appears, given the very limited nature of the initial attack and the aforementioned Iraqi desire for quick transition to negotiations, the Iraqi strategy had no clearly defined military center of gravity that would force the Iranian regime to negotiate. They simply advanced into Iran, took or laid siege to several cities, and transitioned to the tactical defense, which they maintained even after Iran failed to negotiate a peace. Furthermore, Saddam appeared content having "filched some province" as cautioned against by Von Clausewitz.

There are several centers of gravity that potentially could have led to success, including Tehran, the Iranian military, and Khomeini's  loyal Pasadran forces. An attack against Tehran would potentially have caused great turmoil and the probable overthrow of the Ayatollah, the main proponent of the Islamic revolution that threatened Iraq. However, attacking Tehran is high risk given near-even military force ratios, extended lines of communications and unfavorable terrain in Western Iran. Furthermore, if the Iraqis massed forces to invade deep into Iran to threaten Tehran and were defeated, they

could easily have been left with only a marginal defense of Baghdad and the Kirkuk oil fields, exposing their own centers of gravity.

The Iranian military also could have been an optimum center of gravity. The defeat of Iranian forces in the field could have compelled Iran to end their support of insurrection within Iraq—Saddam's goal. The overall army force ratio was in Iraq's favor, but only until Iran mobilized for a general war. Iran also had the advantage in artillery.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, an attempt to destroy the Iranian Army would have also have risked defeat and increased vulnerability of Baghdad and Iraqi oil fields to Iranian counterattack. One could conclude that the options of attacking Tehran or attempting an all out defeat of the Iranian military exceeded Saddam's risk tolerance.

While Tehran and the Iranian military were high-risk centers of gravity, Khomeini's Pasadran forces in the West offered a lower risk alternative. They could be viewed as a center of gravity because they were the principal source of military power for Khomeini. The Pasadran were envisioned as a counterweight to the regular forces which were considered politically unreliable and as mentioned, unsuccessfully attempted coups in June and July preceding the Iraqi invasion.<sup>38</sup> First, if the Pasadran had been defeated, Khomeini might have lost credibility. Second, the military balance within Iran would have shifted to the regular forces. So it would have been logical for Saddam to believe that a defeat of the Pasadran could lead to an overthrow of the Ayatollah's regime by regular forces. The defeat of the Pasadran, who were assigned the more politically sensitive task of defending cities, could have been accomplished by seizing Western Iranian cities such as Abadan.

Had both Abadan and Khorramshahr been taken in the first weeks of the invasion, Khomeini's overthrow could have been triggered. However, the takeover of Khorramshahr came at the cost of approximately 6,000 Iraqis killed and wounded. Concerned with minimizing losses, the Iraqis laid siege to Abadan instead of attacking to avoid the tough street fighting experienced in Khorramshahr, and this siege was ultimately lifted by regular Iranian forces one year after the initial invasion.<sup>39</sup> Had Iraq expended the necessary forces to capture Abadan, they clearly would have given an advantage to internal Iranian forces prone to overthrow Khomeini. By failing to risk the death of several more thousand Iraqi soldiers for Abadan, one can speculate that Saddam potentially missed the opportunity to bring quick closure to the conflict on his terms, avoiding the loss of several hundred thousand Iraqi soldiers over the next eight years. However, one must acknowledge that this result cannot be assured with high confidence, so a coherent military strategy would require an alternative center of gravity that can be attacked within acceptable risk and means. If a risk-acceptable alternative is not available, then a state should not embark on war.

Ultimately one can conclude that in the context of limited wars, enemy centers of gravity may not be vulnerable, in which case there is increased risk of either lengthening the war, or defeat if your centers of gravity are vulnerable. This leaves the strategist with the alternative options of broadening the war and potentially increasing risk to ensure the center or centers of gravity are attacked or, avoiding hostilities altogether. As previously described, in the latter part of the conflict Saddam greatly expanded the intensity and scope of the war and this enabled him to compel a favorable settlement with Iran.

Another key lesson learned is that in assessing and developing an overall strategy to go to war, one must consider the impact if critical assumptions prove to be false. We previously identified two of Saddam's potential assumptions that proved false. The first assumption was that Iran was adverse to war based her weak reaction to the capture of her border towns between 7 and 13 September. This assumption's weakness is that it predicts Iran's reaction to a major attack on its sovereignty based on non-response to a minor attack which may not have been viewed as a threat. The second assumption, that Iran would be willing to negotiate based on a limited invasion by Iraq also proved to be false. There is no clear logic to describe why Iran would capitulate after a limited attack given its advantages in resources and antipathy for Hussein's regime. A critical assessment of these assumptions before committing to a military solution could have given Saddam pause to reconsider his planned invasion and thus prevented a disastrous outcome.

The third, and potentially most important lesson from this conflict, is that once embarking upon war, the aggressor may spark forces of nationalism which could affect the alignment of ethnic and religious groups in unexpected ways and result in expansion of expected violence. In this instance, the ethnic Arabs in the Khuzistan region of Iran remained loyal to the Persian Iranian regime, while as previously mentioned, the Shia Arabs in southern Iraq remained loyal to Iraq despite the draw of Islamic fundamentalism from Iran.<sup>40</sup>

While the forces of nationalism may mitigate religious and ethnic ties, it almost certainly, if sparked, will result in increased passions that may enable the state to

maximize violence. Addressing the increasing role of nationalism, Gordon Craig and Alexander George note in Force and Statecraft,

As the roles of ideology and nationalism and public opinion increase in international affairs these factors encouraged a tendency to view the current enemy as the embodiment of evil...such psychological effects operate to prolong wars and hinder attempts at termination.<sup>41</sup>

Nationalism was a dominant factor in Iran's response to Saddam's attack and her ability to escalate the conflict and avoid negotiations. As noted by Iranian historian Sandra Mackey, "the Iraqi invasion tripped all the switches of Iranian nationalism. The millennia-old emotion of being invaded contributed to a powerful sense of solidarity...that blurred differences between classes, regions and ethnic groups as Iranians rushed to defend their territory."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, it was the strong sense of nationalism in synergy with Islamic revolutionary zeal elevated by the Ayatollah that enabled the massive Iranian human wave attack tactics later in the Iran-Iraq war.

The potential for the phenomena of nationalism must be a significant consideration in planning any war—if the forces of nationalism are inflamed in a target state, a long war may result--either by choice or because the people will demand revenge and clear victory. This is the classic dynamic of Von Clausewitz's trinity with the people's passion expanding both military means and potentially broadening policy goals toward an extreme. This ultimately caused Saddam to escalate the war well beyond his apparent initial intent as he had to sustain eight years of attrition warfare, attack Iran's oil exports, use nerve gas in the field and attack Tehran's civilians with missiles to compel an Iranian cease fire.<sup>43</sup>

In conclusion, Iraq was clearly threatened by Iran's support for Iraqi anti-government factions. Iraq's effort to appease and open a dialogue with Iran were rebuffed, leaving force as Iraq's only perceived alternative. The use of force by Iraq was enticing primarily because Iran was wracked with internal turmoil and isolated from foreign support. Saddam's "invade and negotiate" strategy backfired, because he failed to target a plausible center of gravity, and the invasion triggered Iranian nationalism that ultimately fueled the prolonged war. Therefore, even though he achieved his ultimate objective--preserving his power--he far exceeded his means. The ramifications of Saddam's flawed strategy led to the Gulf War and continue to threaten both his future as well as the future of Iraq. The Iran-Iraq war does offer some interesting lessons that can be applied to future conflict. First, attacking a center of gravity that supports the political object will increase potential for success. Key assumptions must be assessed as part of risk analysis and if there are no viable alternative courses of action should the assumptions prove false, then thoughtful reevaluation would be prudent before embarking on war. Finally, whenever planning the use of force, one should consider the risk that hostilities will evoke the forces of nationalism, which could influence both the duration and magnitude of the war.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Dilip Hiro, "Roots of Conflict: After the Iranian Revolution," in The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict, (Routledge Holdings, Inc, New York, NY, Copyright 1992), 120.
- <sup>2</sup> Hiro, 31.
- <sup>3</sup> Efrajim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, "Deciding on War" in Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography, (King's College, University of London, London, England, Copyright 1991), 136.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid, 138.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, 144.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, 143.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, 30.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, 34, See also Sandra Mackey, The Iranians, Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation, (NY, NY, Dutton Books, 1996), 76-77.
- <sup>9</sup> Efrajim Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War," Orbis, (Spring 1989, Elsevier Science, Oxford, England), 138.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid, 138.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. 35.
- <sup>12</sup> Hiro, The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict, 28-35.
- <sup>13</sup> Dilip Hiro, "Roots of Conflict: After the Iranian Revolution," in The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict, (Routledge Holdings, Inc, New York, NY, Copyright 1992), 28.
- <sup>14</sup> Philip Robbins, "Iraq in the Gulf War: Objectives, Strategies and Problems," in The Gulf War: Regional and International Dimensions, by Hanns W. Maull and Otto Pick, (Beford/St. Martni's Press, New York, NY, Copyright 1989), 46.
- <sup>15</sup> Shahram Chubin, "The Soviet Union and Iran" *Foreign Affairs*, (Volume 61, No 4, Spring 1983), p 72.
- <sup>16</sup> Stephen C. Pelletiere, "Iraq's Decision to Go to War," in The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum, (Praeger Publications, Inc, New York, NY, Copyright 1992), 29.
- <sup>17</sup> Hiro, 38
- <sup>18</sup> J.A.S. Grenville, History of the World in the Twentieth Century, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1994), 919.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, 919.
- <sup>20</sup> Hooshang Amirahmadi and Manoucher Parvin, Post Revolutionary Iran, (Westview Press, Inc, Boulder Colorado, USA, 1988), 64.
- <sup>21</sup> Hiro, 37.
- <sup>22</sup> William O. Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis," in The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts, edited by Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi, (Praeger Publications, Inc., New York, NY, Copyright 1983), 31.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, 31.
- <sup>24</sup> Karsh and Rautsi, "Deciding on War" in Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography, 136.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 36-39.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, 52-53.
- <sup>27</sup> Claudia Wright, "Implications of the Iran-Iraq War," *Foreign Affairs*, (Winter 1980/81, Volume 59, No 2, 288. See also Robbins, "Iraq in the Gulf War: Objectives, Strategies and Problems," in The Gulf War: Regional and International Dimensions, 49.
- <sup>28</sup> Claudia Wright, "Implications of the Iran-Iraq War," *Foreign Affairs*, 288
- <sup>29</sup> Karsh and Rautsi, "Deciding on War" in Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography, 149.
- <sup>30</sup> Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis," in The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts, 30.
- <sup>31</sup> Kurd dissension continued and Saddam did use force and chemical warfare to subdue them.
- <sup>32</sup> Sandra Mackey, The Iranians, Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation, (New York, NY, Dutton Books, 1996), 321
- <sup>33</sup> Robbins, "Iraq in the Gulf War: Objectives, Strategies and Problems," in The Gulf War: Regional and International Dimensions, 53.
- <sup>34</sup> Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis," in The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts, 30.
- <sup>35</sup> [www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos), 4.

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- <sup>36</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, Chapter 8, Types of Resistance in On War, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey, Copyright 1976), 596.
- <sup>37</sup> Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis," in The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts, 31.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War" from Orbis, 210; and Staudenmier, "A Strategic Analysis," in The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts Staudenmier, "A Strategic Analysis," in The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts, 38.
- <sup>40</sup> Staudenmier, "A Strategic Analysis," in The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts, 47.
- <sup>41</sup> Gordon A. Craig and Alexander George, Force and Statecraft, (Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1995), 232.
- <sup>42</sup> Sandra Mackey, The Iranians, Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation, (New York, NY, Dutton Books, 1996), 318.
- <sup>43</sup> Robins, "Iraq in the Gulf War: Objectives, Strategies and Problems," in The Gulf War: Regional and International Dimensions, 53; and Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War" from Orbis, 210.

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